

HOPE in the Heart of Darkness

BY LEE CLONEY

The first time clinical psychologist Dr. Robi Sonderegger went to work with abducted, tortured and traumatized children in Northern Uganda, he felt utterly helpless to turn off the tap of tears that streamed down his face. He believed his professional training and experience had prepared him to work in the war zone with abducted children forced to become child soldiers and sold into sex-slavery. But nothing could have prepared him to hear of the horrendous atrocities these young children had been through.

Over nearly two decades, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)—led by notorious witchdoctor Joseph Kony, has tried to overthrow the Ugandan government and institute a religious dictatorship that has the Ten Commandments at its core. Kony describes his efforts as a holy war to “cleanse” Uganda of its evil.

Kony openly declares that he derives supernatural power and knowledge by conjuring up spirits. These spirits purportedly tell him that anyone found working on Fridays should be killed, anyone found riding a bicycle should have an arm or leg amputated and anyone found to cross the path of the LRA should have their lips, nose and ears cut off or eyes plucked out and then be forced to eat their own flesh. Instant execution is the penalty if the victim cries out in pain.

“It’s all written in the Holy Bible,” Kony tells his followers. It’s hard to conceive that anyone can inflict such senseless unfounded suffering on other humans, let alone children. It’s neither biblical nor humane. Rather, it’s demonic. As soon as



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Every night thousands of children walk many miles from their homes to larger towns, seeking a safer place to sleep, fearing abduction and murder by LRA soldiers.

children are abducted, they are stripped naked and forced to participate in witchcraft ceremonies, intended to make them “bullet proof” for combat or ready for sexual violation.

The Challenge of Survival in Northern Uganda

With up to 35,000 children estimated to have been abducted and traumatized to date, the United Nations has described Northern Uganda as the most dangerous place in the world for children to live and one of the world’s most unattended emergencies.

Villagers in Northern Uganda no longer farm their land for fear of being attacked, and so nearly two million people (one-fifth of all African refugees—90 percent of the population of Northern Uganda) are now living as internally displaced persons (IDP refugees).

Despite military protection in refugee camps, LRA attacks on IDP camps have been common practice. Children (as

young as seven) abducted by the LRA are forced to fight against the National Military Forces of Uganda, raid villages for food, destroy property, rape and slaughter civilians and abduct other children.

Young children are often forced to witness their parents being killed. Moreover, as a means of trauma and emotional manipulation, abducted children are required to participate in

the killing of other abducted children—or face being killed themselves. Many children report being forced to go back to their home villages and slaughter any remaining relatives.

These emotionally manipulative tactics are aimed at discouraging children from escaping; inadvertently communicating that there is nothing left—no reason for them to return. Young girls are given to commanders as wives, to bear children into captivity with the intention of grooming them to be the new generation of ruthless killers. It is estimated that 90-95 percent of the LRA is now comprised of children; creating a dilemma for the National military objectives to counter the rebel group’s violent activities.

The good news is that since the war began, many thousands of formerly-abducted children have managed to escape. With the Ugandan government offering full amnesty to any child-soldier or commander wishing to surrender, more and more rebels are coming out of the bush.

Despite the presence of many international and domestic aid organizations in the region and the establishment of “children of war” rehabilitation

TOP TWO PHOTOS: CHEMONICS/M. HERRICK—USAID; BOTTOM: FAMILY CHALLENGE



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camps, Dr. Sonderegger was initially perplexed that there were no professional clinical services offering to help young escapees to deal with the trauma they had experienced.

After only a few short weeks of rest in a rehabilitation camp, formerly abducted children are returned to their home villages or IDP camps—where surviving family members have fled.

Unfortunately, these children run the risk of being re-abducted. Moreover, holding on to anger, bitterness, nightmares, deep hurt and resentment, post-traumatic stress becomes a real concern for the children, their families and the communities where they have been reintegrated. Without help to process and deal with their traumatic experiences, there is concern that these children may grow up to participate in the next generation of hostility—as the cycle of violence continues.

One 11-year-old girl witnessed the slaughter of her entire family. She was raped every day for three years and forced to watch other children or face being killed herself. After escaping, she found that her ordeal was far from over and her prospects were bleak.

Relentless night terrors, cold sweats and flashback mental images continue to plague her. Physical wounds healed. However, left untreated, the traumatic psychological wounds she endured will continue to fester and be ex-

pressed in dysfunctional and promiscuous behaviors.

Trauma Rehabilitation Services

In 2004, the Family Challenge Charitable Trust decided it was time to stand up and be a voice for these children whose cries go unheard—offering tangible measures to end this cycle and return lost childhood to children. The organization's founder, Dr. Robi Sonderegger, met with the strategic aid agencies in Northern Uganda to discuss ways to provide effective trauma rehabilitation services for formerly abducted children. Since that time, he has provided evidence-based child-trauma rehabilitation training for counselors, social workers, the center staff of World Vision, Concerned Parents Association, Childcare International and the Rachelle Center for Rehabilitation and Reintegration of formerly abducted children in Northern Uganda. Earlier this year, he returned from yet another round of intensive clinical training workshops in Africa with ever-increasing insight about serving the children of this tragedy.

Children who are able to forgive their former captors integrate well back into their community. However, without a Christian framework, children seem unable to embrace the concept of why they would forgive those who killed their family, abused them and forced them to commit unspeakable atrocities. Fortunately, because Christianity is such a strong part of the Ugandan culture, a number of organizations have incorporated Jesus into their rehabilitation process. Those children who acknowledge Jesus as their Savior, a force more powerful than Joseph Kony, seem to be set free from his power. However, due to the openly acknowledged influence of witchcraft in the region, without Jesus many children report being in a constant state of fear—believing that Kony can read their minds and see them wherever they go.

Clan leaders, politicians and non-Christian communities try to encourage children in their reha-



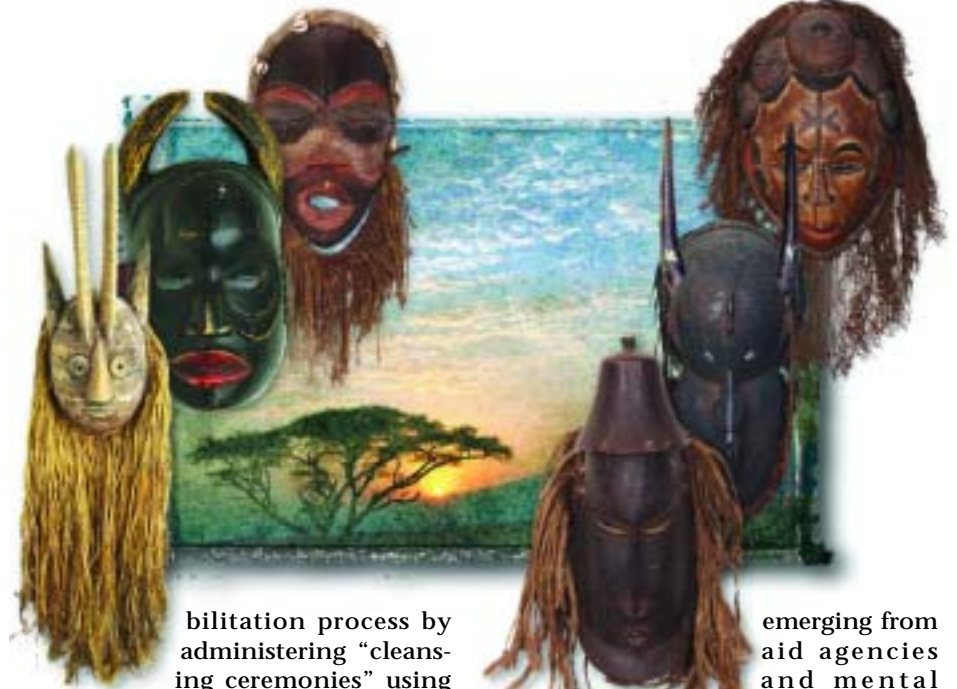
Ugandan street child

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bilitation process by administering “cleansing ceremonies” using raw eggs and water splashing rituals which stem from ancient ancestral worship practices (now being revived as “traditional culture”). Although these ceremonies are conducted with the intentions of making the child feel accepted and forgiven for the atrocities they were forced to commit, Sonderegger has observed that for many children this process can also be traumatizing.

Upon abduction, forced participation in similar witchcraft ceremonies is one of the first traumatic encounters a child endures. If there is a slight irregularity in the ceremony (for example, a child's egg is accidentally cracked in the course of the ritual) the child is killed on the spot. Consequently, participation in “cleansing ceremonies” after a child escapes may actually incite trauma by association, resulting in prolonged emotional dysfunction.

Moreover, because the original ceremonies are said to “bullet proof” children in captivity (but in spite of “bullet proofing,” child soldiers are frequently killed from bullet wounds) children come to learn that these ceremonies don't really work.

In fact, there is wide criticism—

emerging from aid agencies and mental health professionals—that these ceremonies provide little more than publicity for those conducting the ceremonies, rather than having any tangible therapeutic value for participants.

The culturally-sensitive training conducted by Dr. Sonderegger involves educating trauma-counselors and facilitators in evidence-based methodologies that work, so as to provide an alternative to less effective ceremonial practices. Some have argued that Sonderegger's training may ignore traditional African methodologies. However, Sonderegger asserts that if organizations really want to embrace African traditions, then they have to conclude that Christianity, which is so embedded in the Ugandan culture, must be the African framework. He emphasizes that without a Christian foundation, interventions in Northern Uganda could not truly be called culturally sensitive, culture-respecting or therapeutic for participants.

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The Young Soldiers of the Lord's Resistance Army

Thirty-five thousand children have been abducted in the past 18 years in Northern Uganda. Many of the survivors are young soldiers of Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The LRA has been engaged in guerrilla warfare with the Ugandan Army for almost two decades, seeking to implement Kony's theocratic vision for Uganda. Kony wants nothing less than a Uganda whose laws and culture is based on his interpretation of the Ten Commandments.

Joseph Kony is, in reality, a mystic and medium who is a ruthless and merciless military leader. Kony believes that his spiritual direction comes from eight angels—three Americans, two Chinese, two Sudanese and one Congolese. His army, the LRA, is largely composed of abducted children who are emotionally brutalized by the appalling atrocities they are forced to commit. Born in 1964, Kony was an illiterate Catholic altar boy as a child. He received religious/voodoo indoctrination and teaching from his aunt, Voodoo Priestess Alice Lakwena.

Lakwena was a Ugandan charismatic military/religious leader who was reputed to channel a World War I Italian army officer. Almost two decades ago she led thousands of Northern Ugandan rebels to their deaths as they battled the army of President Yoweri Museveni. Lakwena's self-described Holy Spirit Army stormed the Ugandan capital of Kampala in 1988,

armed with sticks, stones and voodoo toys. Lakwena had promised her soldiers that the rocks they tossed would be turned into grenades by the Holy Spirit. Notwithstanding Lakwena's



**JOSEPH KONY
LRA LEADER**

promises, the Holy Spirit Army was routed, with survivors escaping into the hills. The remaining soldiers were rallied by Lakwena's nephew, Joseph Kony, and became a new rebel army called the LRA.

Once abducted into Kony's evil empire, children are used as pack mules, targets, decoys or sex slaves—Kony himself is reputed to have 60 "wives." While his stated vision for a new Uganda includes a country living by the Ten Commandments, Kony apparently finds it convenient to ignore one of the Ten Commandments which forbids adultery. The abducted children of Joseph Kony are robbed of childhood, and in many cases, of life itself. They are turned into ruthless butchers who commit atrocities, whose souls are seared by what they have seen and done. Immediately following their



FEAR OF THE LRA IS SO GREAT JUST ONE ABDUCTION CAN CAUSE THOUSANDS OF CHILDREN TO FLEE TO IDP CAMPS.



abduction, the initial indoctrination into the LRA experienced by these children includes beatings, rapes and the severing of limbs by machetes.

Kony, like his aunt Alice Lakwena before him, also teaches that his soldiers will be shielded in battle by the Holy Spirit. Kony instructs his young followers that the sign of the cross, the application of Holy Oil, prayer songs, rocks sewn into clothing and bottles of water will magically protect them from Ugandan soldiers.

Kony has now retreated with his army into Southern Sudan, enabling him to launch raids across the border, while affording him the protection of the Sudanese. The Sudanese themselves are involved in a brutal war, as its majority Muslim army inflicts staggering suffering on Christian villagers.

In a world filled with "bad news religion," the efforts of Australian clinical psychologist Robi Sonderegger and the Family Challenge Charitable Trust are noteworthy. *The Plain Truth* commends Sonderegger's work, countering the ignorance and superstition of religion with authentic Christianity.

—the Editors